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ABSTRACT

In separate but overlapping narratives, 3 women composition teachers ponder some of the challenges female instructors face in defining their role for themselves and the students they teach. Students and women instructors both experience considerable confusion over what role the woman instructor fills; both parties view her too often not only as a teacher but as a mother too. Teachers, meanwhile, too often find themselves accepting these extra, motherly responsibilities. They feel too much for their students and assume too much responsibility for the quality of their work. This confusion suggests how important it is for women teachers to invent new roles for themselves, roles that are appropriate to them, specifically as women. Could women instructors think of themselves as midwives, people who assist others but can only, by definition of their role, do so much, people who cannot be blamed for failures? Perhaps, but midwives are not widely respected in Western culture and, being women, are not adequately paid for their work. Still, the effort to generate an alternative model is worthwhile. Some recent directions in writing classroom pedagogy present additional, though related, difficulties for women. A male, assuming the position of the student-centered teacher, deliberately relinquishes authority and earns student respect for this move, but when a women assumes the same position, she is giving nothing up, only doing what is expected to her: to be silent. (TB)

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(In)Visible Step Sisters: Stories of Women Teaching Composition

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Kari:

I'm halfway through a week of conferences with my composition students: forty-three students, forty-three first essays of the semester, forty-three forays into rhetoric ranging from promising to (mostly) inchoate. I graded all day Monday, got up early for conferences Tuesday morning, came home that afternoon to ten more essays calling my name, got up early Wednesday for more conferences, dragged myself home to grade more essays . . .

I can't say which is more draining--the grading or the conferences. Trying to fit your mind around your own ideas is hard enough; trying to fit it around someone else's is harder; doing it forty-three times threatens insanity. But that's not the end of the process: having assessed the paper and made suggestions how it might be improved, one then has to face the student--the student who has got used to getting As or Bs in high school for essays just like this and who has never <u>ever</u> seen a D looming at the bottom of the end comments. How many students will I make cry today? How many strong young men will shake and not be able to look me in the eye?

Being a literary type, I naturally look for an image to describe the way I feel about this experience: like a rodent running in a squirrel cage?--not horrible enough. That would be

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preferable to the way I feel--as if I will explode if I have to go on reading these stillborn arguments. No, I feel like a trapped jungle bird driven to pulling all the feathers out of its breast one by one, or like a housebound exotic cat scratching its fur off. In the midst of grading an essay, I frequently find myself unable to go on for even another second, and I leap from my chair, curse all high school English teachers, and begin pacing--usually in the general direction of the kitchen. I paw through the fridge. Don't we have any chocolate in this house? Ah--a tin of Almond Roca left over from the Christmas excesses hides in the back of a cupboard. I bite into the toffee. It turns into sweet, melting shards in my mouth . . . and I begin to feel my teeth melting, too. I realize that all the people in gum disease commercials are my age, so I grab a glass, fill it with Scotch, rinse out my mouth--and swallow. I tell my husband, "If I had conferences every week I would be a two-hundred-pound alcoholic." He doesn't laugh.

Midway through this week of horrors, I have two dreams.

I'm in bed between my parents. In through the door bursts one of my students, explaining as he approaches why he won't be able to turn in his essay on time. I raise myself up on one arm and stare at him in disbelief--what's this guy doing in my house? in my bedroom? But my look of horror doesn't deter him--he keeps coming closer, still explaining. Before I can open my mouth to speak, he's next to the bed and, still talking, he climbs over my father, into bed next to me--and farts.

Instantly my parents leap out of bed and stand at the other end of the room, glaring at me. Like the popular Flat Roses and Instant Infant, these are Cardboard Parents, the perfect gift for people too busy to go home to visit and get lectured in person. Just install one or both of these in your house--preferably in a corner of your bedroom--and you can experience going home without cutting into your valuable time.

My cardboard parents stand mute and disapproving, hands on hips, pointing fingers, for the rest of the dream. They don't need to say anything, of course, because those familiar looks on their faces say it all: "You've done it again, brought some dirty, stinking mess into our lives, and it's all your fault. What are you going to do about it this time?"

What was I going to do about it? If I tell my student what I really think of what he's done, I might crush him--why, he might never write again. On the other hand, what about the standards of the department? . Trapped between compassion and criticism, I lie paralyzed. Even in my dream, I begin to wonder where the chocolate is.

And then, one more time, as they always do, the right words come to me, the perfect combination of firmness and friendliness. I calmly get out of bed as if nothing untoward had happened and say in my most encouraging mentor voice, "If you need a place to sleep, Joe, I can make up a bed on the couch for you."

And the dream ends.

Suddenly I'm in my office in the basement of Modern Languag-

es. Somehow I've come to school totally unprepared for the day. I'm wearing a lightweight blouse and skirt, but the weather has turned cold and windy. I've forgotten to bring a lunch, and I have only a few coins in my purse--and it's still another week until payday. I try to call home, hoping for a motherly voice at the other end of the line, someone who will drop everything and bring me my lunch box and my sweater. But nobody answers that call anymore. Well, I think, maybe the secretary has something in the freezer upstairs she'll share with me.

I'm getting ready to head for the coffee room when our revered Chaucerian appears in my office reading the newspaper. He draws my attention to a news story--in Phoenix a pack of dogs have attacked a child. A window appears in the wall of my basement office (you can tell this is a dream) and through it I can see the scene described in the newspaper. Suddenly I'm out there, a part of the picture. A young girl sits on the ground with her back to me, blood staining her shirt. However, it is not to her that my attention is drawn, but rather to the dozens of dogs laid out on the ground around her. The angry crowd has kicked and stoned them and they lie, bleeding and dying, lifting their ugly mongrel heads and looking to me, pleading to me, for help. I realize then that they are my responsibility, but I have the means neither to heal them nor to put them out of their misery.

The alarm goes off, the dream ends, I awake. It's 5:30 and I still have three more essays to grade before conferences begin.

These dreams (not to mention my self-destructive behavior) have made me wonder once again what it is about this process that's so difficult. I'm not averse to hard work and I love teaching. Why does the process of grading and conferring with students make me a) eat chocolate, b) drink cheap whiskey, c) have psychotic dreams, or d) all of the above? Why do essays call forth such an emotional response from me and, perhaps more importantly, from my students? Because I refuse to believe that the TAs in the math department keep boxes of Kleenex on their desks for sobbing students (three out of five desks in our office provide Kleenex--what's the total in yours?), and I refuse to believe that those hypothetical math students weep at the sight of a less-than-perfect scantron.

I make it through the morning conferences. I sit in my chair, spent and dazed, when my officemate JaneE walks in. "Is this just me?" I ask her. "Does everybody have such a hard time with grading and conferencing? Do you feel this level of angst every time conferences come around?"

JaneE:

Kari, of course it's not "just you." It is hard to do conferences; it's murder, torture even. Just think of it: every twenty minutes for hours in a row for days in a row you're expected to re-create yourself, to be a new and perfect self every twenty minutes. And each self you create has to be custom designed for the student and the context you encounter.

The thing about conferences is that each one is a totally

new situated moment, totally and absolutely different from even previous ones you've had with the "same" student. Each one is a new "text." Sure, there are some repetitive patterns: the students might have similar problems with organizing or developing their ideas, with getting down the vocabulary and concepts for talking about fiction, with discovering what's interesting and fruitful for their analyses, etc. etc. But in a successful conference each suggestion has to be cast in terms related to the topics of each student's essay and then re-cast in order to incorporate each student's additional idiosyncracies of general personality, specific mood on that given day. You have to take into consideration the numbers and gender and volume of other people in the overcrowded grad student office at that particular moment, your particular mood and patience threshold and bladder capacity, and on and on and on. And for all of these considerations, there aren't any rules, None. None at all.

Oh sure, there are those myriad bits of lore about being a good teacher that circulate in your head. "Be approachable, but don't be too friendly. Don't hurt their egos, but be honest. Remind *them that you're evaluating their writing, not their personalities, but don't undermine the importance of writing at the academy. Don't be a pushover, but take their thoughts and feelings into account." And on and on, ad infinitum. Though the source of these "rules" may be long forgotten, though their validity is always in question, their cacophony rings in our heads incessantly. Their contradictions are only remotely*

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distinguishable as Truth or Lore or Negative Self Talk.

All of this stuff is going around and around in your brain like those revolving racks at the dry cleaners that somehow magically know to stop just at the purple velvet dress that you get cleaned after the yearly Christmas party. Or, no, better yet, this information processing going on while you do conferences is like a big rolodex in your head. Your brain is cycling through, sifting out the material irrelevant to this situation, trying to match up factors with situations it's encountered before, a piece of folklore with an existing predicament, an observable physical behavior with an interpretation you trust and recognize.

And remember that all of this takes place in the first thirty seconds of the conference. And, as if you didn't have enough to process already, if you're one of those teachers who believes in being as individual with students as possible and as open and forthcoming about yourself as a person, you've got the additional cards on your rolodex that deal with this particular student. God, what a circuit overload!

Kari:

Yeah, yeah, I know all this stuff--I'm not even in the Rhetoric program and I can quote you Peter Elbow--be Socrates and Jesus at the same time if you want to be a good teacher. But I don't want to be either of those MEN, thank you very much.

Anyway, when I'm grading and conferencing, I want to be Jael, so I can drive a tent peg into somebody's head. Or I want to be Sigourney Weaver in Aliens so I can tote an Uzi on days I come in to conference. "Wanna know what I think of this essay? Let my metallic friend here speak for me!!!

JaneE:

Oh, I get it: it's anger that you want to talk about. Well, here, here to that! I am so sick and tired of students who come to conferences so they can argue about their grades. Or how about those students who try to make you plot out in twenty minutes the minute details of exactly what they need to do in their revisions so, when their papers don't receive A's, they can say "Well, I did everything you told me to during conference!" I hate the way they glare at me if they have to revise or if they don't get A's, as if I have somehow failed them because their writing skills are shabby. I resent their complaints that I haven't given them enough time to do the assignment when their research paper rough draft--obviously jotted out in less than an hour even though the assignment was given weeks earlier--is only two pages long and only accomplishes half of the assignment and now they have only two days before the final draft is due. "Looks like you needed to start earlier and put more time into the rough draft stage," I tell them, or "Hey, it's not my problem," or even "Look, I'm not going to keep talking to you if you don't stop shouting/swearing/interrupting," whatever. But they keep saying, even writing on their evaluations of me, "She

didn't give us enough time to do our assignments." Then, of course, I'm racked with guilt later. What if they really were trying their best and I made them feel bad? What if I really didn't give them enough time? What if what I see as laziness is really ineptitude? What if I just read the "text" of that student in that moment wrong? I worry and feel guilty and worry some more.

I don't want to discount totally that worry either. Because, in addition to all the other stuff I've already said that I have to be juggling in my mind during a conference with a student, I also value my emotional reactions to students because those responses give me important information. I value <u>all</u> the intuitive and emotional stuff that makes me a good teacher as well as a good person, someone who knows how to sense when another person is lying, or being lazy, or compensating for learning disabilities without even realizing it, or putting me on, or putting me down, or treating me like his mother rather than his teacher, or coming on to me, or about to break into a violent psychotic episode.

<u>Kari:</u>

Hold it right there--that bit about being a mother rather than a teacher, or having students come on to you. That might get us closer to part of why this exercise is so difficult. Because the frustration I feel about my students' writing often feels very like the frustration I feel when I'm being co-dependent. I'm feeling someone else's feelings, worrying about

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the consequences of their actions, but I have no control over those actions. All this stuff that seems to make me a successful teacher also seems to be what makes me a well-socialized--in other words, codependent--woman. All this engagement with my students' every thought and feeling, all my involvement with them as persons, is exactly what is so hard about all this. And I'm not sure it always has a good effect on their writing. Oh, yes, I'm persuaded that with enough tutoring I can help any student write a good essay. But is that my job? Aren't I taking responsibility for their work, for their success? Isn't this why we get comments from students that imply that the D is our problem, not theirs--because our codependent behavior reinforces their lack of responsibility for their own work?

How many times has a student said to you, "I showed this to my high school English teacher and she said it was good"? Only last week, a student I'd sent to tutoring told me, "You and my tutor should get together on this. She told me there was plenty of good stuff in my essay." These kinds of comments speak to students' refusal to take responsibility for the consequences of their efforts. And our determination to make them better writers may only confirm them in their irresponsibility.

JaneE:

Maybe "The Blame Game" is better then Elbow's "the doubting game" as a descriptor of at least some of our students' approaches to composition: they keep trying to throw back on us the "blame" for the failure of their writing (failure which, by some

of their standards, means a grade lower than an "A"). By trying to be nice or helpful or understanding or supportive, we're accepting that unsightly hot potato that they throw at us. Like, for instance, my student Rachel who has taken hours of my time in conferences so that she can revise her "E" essays. So that nobody has to flunk the class, I let students with D's and E's re-write final drafts, but I allow only up to C- as a substitute grade on a re-write so that--to my mind--the system remains fair. I've given Rachel the substitute "C-" (a grade which I consider an act of kindness) on her re-writes., but she is certain that I am the one who, in her words, "is imposing a glass ceiling on her" because she will probably not be able to earn a grade higher than a "C" for the course. She's also the one who, when I refuse to change my policy about C- being the highest grade a re-write can receive, screams at me down an entire hallway "Well I guess you just think you're a fucking great teacher, don't you?"

Much less dramatic but still annoying as hell is another one of my students playing the blame game, Gretchen. She stolidly refuses to write a rough draft longer than two handwritten pages at most but, because she's quite bright and a better than average writer, she still manages to pull off a "B-" or better on each assignment. Frustrated with her complaining about her grades, I wrote these comments to her on a final draft of an essay: "I keep thinking that if you had turned <u>this</u> version in as a rough draft, then your revision of <u>it</u> could've been a pretty powerful piece, probably even an 'A' paper." In her next conference, Gretchen--

who has never been to office hours, whose research paper rough draft now sitting in my hand is her usual two handwritten notebook pages long--says to me, "Well before we start I want to say that I think we should get to have two conferences with you for each paper, because--as you told me--if I had the chance to write another draft and have you comment on it--then I'd be able to get an 'A' on all my papers." What really perturbs me is that, though I did say to her that the point of Freshman Composition was not to ensure that she get an "A," I didn't point out the arrogance and sloth her remark belies, the passive approach to her own education that it displays. Instead, I felt defensive, as if it were my job to explain why composition courses don't offer that service to students.

Kari:

This is just the kind of involvement in students' lives that I think is negative, our fretting about students' responses to the less-than-perfect grades they get on their essays. Ann Brigham said the other day that she feels fine about the grades she's given when she's at home, but then she remembers the sweet eighteen-year-old that she has to return the paper to. That's where the pain lies. And that's when we bring into play the tools of codependent behavior.

Our students present us with essays that are the equivalent of the social embarrassment my student committed in my dream. As

experienced teachers, we can name the stink--D+, we record in the gradebook. But then all our efforts go into rescinding that grade. At conferences we talk as fast as we can, trying to soften the blow of the grade--as if air freshener were spraying out of our mouths instead of words. All that effort to pretend the D isn't there is a kind of lie--and that's the beginning of codependent behavior. A student recently wrote in her journal, "My inability to present you with a cohesive paper truly caused me grief. But it was precisely grief and despair that motivated [me] to make a fair attempt to better my writing skills." What happens when we get in the way of that "grief and despair"? What happens when we feel the feelings? We begin by taking responsibility for their feelings, and end by taking responsibility for their success or failure. No wonder we end a week of conferences exhausted--it's like being married to forty-three alcoholics.

JaneE:

Or having forty-three children. I think that's what I really hate about how my blaming students act and how I respond: we both keep imagining my role as teacher to be too much like that of a mother. So, in my own mind sometimes, in my students' minds most of the time, and (apparently) in the minds of our evaluators, administrators, even our respected scholars of composition pedagogy, the qualities of a good teacher, particularly a female one, are synonymous with those of a good mother. Thus springs much of my guilt, I think: A good mother doesn't say things like "You're being egotistical and lazy" or "I don't

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care if you don't like it, the paper's still due on Friday," or "Do it yourself; I'm busy," or "Grow up for god's sake!" No. Those are the words of a nag or a bitch, and I judge myself as such when those deserved remarks slip out, or even when I think them. This notion of what a teacher should be is obviously keeping me stuck.

So, I want to reinvent myself in this role. And I want administrators, teacher trainers, scholars, and--through the trickle down theory--eventually students too--to reinvent their idea of me in this role as well. I think we need a new model, a new metaphor for a teacher. What do you think about the metaphor that Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule use, namely midwife? Personally, I like it. It's very female, but authoritative, an ancient and respected position that connotes common sense, reliability, and just a little bit of magic or mysticism. Nonetheless, the midwife's is not the position of central importance at the birthing process: the birther is the one doing the crucial work; there's no way the work can get done without her efforts. So, midwife works better than mother for me as a metaphor for teacher because it honors the importance of the role without the same baggage of what it means to be "good" in the role, without the same connotations of responsibility. Nobody ever blames the midwife if the child is stillborn, do they?

Kari:

Sure, JaneE, you and I think "midwife is an authoritative

image--we're highly evolved women. But if you want to have any respect "trickle down" to us through the culture, I think you'll have to find another image because midwives aren't greatly or widely respected out there in the real world. Do they make as much as doctors--the descendants of those men who replaced midwives when medicine developed as a profession in the early modern period? No. It's still the male-defined professional that receives the cultural sign of respect--money. Anyway, whatever currency the midwife image might have is compromised by the fact that men have co-opted whatever power we hoped to find there as we re-define ourselves. After all, if male scholars can cast themselves as midwives, then there's not much room left for us, is there?

But I agree with you--we need an image of female power to replace the ones that keep getting foisted upon us and that we so readily buy into. As I try to imagine how I want to define the teaching work I do, the closest I can come to an image of female power is "wise woman"--the mediating figure on the mountaintop who knows the meaning of life. I want to be heir to Diotima, the woman from whom Socrates learned everything he knew about love. Or a devotee of Holy Wisdom. I want to be respected for the knowledge I have earned over eight long hard years of teaching composition--a Sophistic, situated knowledge and, yes, a wisdom that I have acquired bit by bit, essay by essay, student by student.

Because the way it is now, out students would never think of

us as founts of wisdom or as having anything much at all to offer them. Rather they console themselves for a bad grade on an essay by saying "Well, grading is so subjective," as if we're helpless victims of our emotions and prejudices responding hysterically to their essays. I'm here to say, "it ain't that subjective." I--and you--can tell a good essay from a bad essay from a mediocre essay from an excellent essay from a hopelessly incoherent mess. And, what's more, we can show someone how to make it better. Maybe if student thought of themselves as coming to us for the wisdom and knowledge we possess, they'd work a little harder and treat us better.

JaneE:

Yeah, Kari, but when I hear us complaining about how our students treat us, I can just hear my Mother saying, "You knew what things would be like when you accepted that job, didn't you?" (Here's where I mumble "Yes" and stare at the floor.) "Well, then, make the best of it," she'd say. And yet here we are in front of a captive audience in a national conversation, and what am we doing? Complaining! I sort of doubt that this is what mom would consider making the best of it.

And there's more. Let me tell you about a more recent, but not-so-ordinary day in my new life as a female composition professor. It's a Wednesday morning about 4 weeks into the semester. Wynn, the T.A. and grader for my First Year Composition course, and I are scheduled to meet in my office any minute now; we try to meet before each MWF class since I'm still adjusting to

teaching 60 students in a college composition course. Wynn and I and another grader have read and commented on the rough drafts of 20 students each; students have in turn revised those drafts, knowing full-well that the substance of their revision process is one of the major criterion that the three of us graders will consider when we read these final versions. It's about 10 minutes before class on the day when their final drafts are due.

I check my mailbox and find a note from Helen, the Tutor/TA coordinator. The note says this: "Wynn is quitting. Friday will be her last day. Can you meet with Roberta, your new TA on Friday at 11:00?" In addition to my instant mental response to the note ("I teach Friday at 11:00 and so "No, dammit, I can't meet with Roberta then!"), I'm shocked: I've seen Wynn every other day for at least an hour and she's not mentioned one word to me about leaving.

Stunned, I return to my office. There sits Wynn. "You're quitting?" I ask her.

"Yeah, I'm getting married," she says. "And I'm really sick of getting flack about it. You'd think after I'd worked here three years, people would be happy for me instead of on my case because I'm quitting. Helen has been all over me for the last two days."

I suppress the urge to scream, cry, slap her, <u>something</u>. "Well," I say, "I sure do wish you had told me sooner." Deep breath. "I can understand why you would feel upset about people not being happy for you. We forget about the human interaction

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element of our jobs and our roles. So let me say, 'Congratulations on your marriage.'

"But I think you need to imagine what it's like for me and for Helen. I have 60 students sitting downstairs waiting for me and for you. I am trying--I have been trying for a month now--to provide quality instruction to a group of students that is ridiculously large. There's never enough time to answer all their questions, listen to all their stories, provide all the office hours that these conditions create. I'm trying my best to do a good job anyway. You as the TA are supposed to be my support, but you're not going to be here after Friday and I didn't even know that until three minutes ago. Frankly, I don't have time to be human, to attend to the human interaction aspects of our work. I am going to be collecting 60 compositions in two minutes and what I'm worried is this: are you going to be grading your 1/3 of those essays or not?"

"I'll grade 'em," she mumbles, staring at the floor. And you can bet I take her up on her grudging offer.

I feel like hell when I think and act these ways. In these tales I appear to myself, and maybe to you too, as not only a bad teacher but also a bad mentor to my TA. Worse, I see myself as a bad woman: I'm not nurturing or comforting or connecting; instead I'm abrasive and single-minded and self-serving. True, I can't see how the conditions I work in give me many other choices. Nonetheless, I berate myself.

What is the problem here? Is it me? Is it my job? Do

other teachers feel this way? Faced with similar circumstances, would a male teacher think he's a bad man? Or is there something particular, something invisible about being a female composition instructor that makes me internalize my frustrations? Is that peculiar invisibility a "feminization"?

Early in the history of our discipline, 1967 to be exact, William Riley Parker's article "Where Do English Departments Come From?" labeled composition as the stepchild of English departments. He initiated compositionists' concern about the marginalization of composition studies. As recently as last month's (October 1995) issue of CCC, Elizabeth Flynn's article "Feminism and Sciencism" confronts the same issue; she uses the now-commonplace term "feminization" to characterize the process by which composition is systematically and systemically devalued.

To support their use of the term "feminization," some scholars cite the profession's preponderance of women: an estimated 2/3 of the people working in the field are female. (Miller 123). Others refer to the qualities usually associated with a practitioner in the field. For instance, Janice Lauer explains that "Many descriptions of recent pedagogies maintain that instructional practices, particularly those of expressive and critical pedagogies, are marks of feminization because they are collaborative, student centered, and nurturing" (276). Susan Holbrook prefers to classify aspects of the current context of composition work as evidence of its "feminization": "Women's work has four related characteristics: it has a disproportionate

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number of women workers; it is service-oriented; it pays less than men's work; it is devalued" (202).

And indeed, those of us doing the instructional work of composition studies know all too well the truth in Holbrook's appraisal of labor conditions in composition:

> Saturated by women practitioners, focused on pedagogy, allied with education departments and school teaching, conceived as having a 'service' and elementary place in the curriculum, and pervaded by paraprofessionalism, composition has become women's work. And so it will remain--disproportionately the work of women and work of lesser value --as long as these conditions remain. (211)

Clearly, our efforts to venerate the discipline of composition and the professional labor of compositionists will require nothing short of intervention in the hegemonic practices and beliefs of our capitalist and patriarchal institutions.

What political action constitutes such intervention? How can we resist rather than comply with societal constructs that alienate the female composition teacher and inscribe her as Other? In her article "M[other]: Lives on the Outside," Lil Brannon claims that "when we fail to talk about the teaching of writing as a matter of people's lives, we fail. . .to see our own compliance with the rules of social behavior that traditionally have defined the man's world as being separate from the woman's" (458). In this claim lies a methodology: Let us talk about our lives when we talk about our teaching.

To put this method in other terms, let us attend to the politics of location. Brannon explains that "gender identities [are]. . .located within the narratives of relationships that

make up human experience;" thus, a female instructor's narrating her experiences will situate her in history and ideology, will provide her a location, "an institutional space and a teaching space within which to work" (458).

Brannon contends that such location is crucial because existing narratives of teaching--seen in popular culture's forms like the movie Stand and Deliver or narrated in disciplinary accounts like Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary--typically portray the teacher as a romantic hero who rescues his students from authoritarianism and drudgery and inspires them to creative achievement.

> What makes this heroic image difficult to rewrite is that it operates within traditions quite common in American culture: the rugged individual who works against all odds to make a difference. . . .The image of the inspirational teacher, the teacher as 'knower,' the charismatic superstar [who] win[s] the hearts and minds of students through the sheer force of [his] personality and wisdom. [But] The image of teacher as charismatic knower makes problematic the 'feminine' values of a 'caring' teacher: commitment and student-centeredness. (459)

Typically, even the discipline's stories of teachers dedicated to commitment and student-centeredness do not offer women teachers narratives that resist societal constructs of the teacher as hero. Feminist scholars like Brannon, Kirsch, Luke, and Gore agree that the male scholars who dominate the field's discussion of critical pedagogy--Giroux, Freire, and Shor---usually ignore gender in their theories and practices. Though those men argue that the critical teacher's goal is to become invisible, the way that they enact this goal is to "masculinize"

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the values of commitment and student-centeredness by "emphasizing intellectual rigor and political aggression rather than empathy or affective consciousness raising" (Brannon 460). This image of teacher perpetuates traditional gender roles and privileges males. As Brannon explains,

> The male critical teacher, in effect, is allowed to maintain his privilege through a double move. In resisting the image of male teacher as all-knowing, distant, imparter of knowledge, the male critical teacher, gives up, on the one hand, the power of the authoritarian, conservative male teacher, yet, on the other, paradoxically gains power by becoming the 'star,' the male hero in the educational narrative mythos. (460)

Women teachers, however, cannot make this same double move, for they are not sacrificing power or resisting an image of themselves as omnipotent; a woman's moves to relinquish her individuality and become invisible are not heroic, they are expected. In fact, woman rarely if ever portrays herself as a rugged individualist; the role simply does not fit her. As Susan Stanford Freidman explains in "Woman's Autobiographical Selves," the indulgence of thinking of one's self as individual is

> the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an "individual." Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color, have no such luxury. . . .The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege. (39)

Little wonder then that patriarchal narratives posit men as subjects, women as objects to be acted upon or to serve. Less wonder still that when popular culture or even our disciplinary literature does consider the teacher as heroine--in, say, movies

like The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie or disciplinary accounts like Janet Emig's, Mina Shaughnessy's or Lynn Quitman Troyka's---those stories foreground students' successes made possible by the sacrifices of their female teacher.

Given these conventionally understood narratives and their limited and limiting roles for women, how am I constructed when I talk about teaching writing as a matter of my life? My hunch is that when I "complain" about my work, when I speak my truth about my ordinary, frustrating, everyday life as a woman teaching composition, I'm probably typecast as one of the mean-spirited, ugly, noxious step-sisters who bitterly resents my beautiful, kind-hearted and hardworking sister Cinderella. If only I were self-sacrificing like Cinderella, if only I would wordlessly scrub the floors and clean out the fire pit, if only I would modestly seek the invisibility of the shadows when the gallant Prince Charming visits and then demurely protesting my worthiness even when the glass slipper fits my dainty foot, if only I would act like that--then I'd get to be a heroine.

But because I'm resentful when that tight (probably cruelly pointed-toed and high-heeled) slipper doesn't fit me, because I'm assertive and maybe even loud in my complaints about work conditions, I am constructed as a mean and ugly stepsister. Needless to say, I don't like that role. I'm not evil, mean-spirited, ugly or noxious. I often do feel resentful, but it's not Cinderella that I resent. It's the plot. It's the Master Narrative's image of woman teacher that locates me outside any place of

privilege; that plot denies me voice. "The problem for the outsider," Brannon tells us, "is the problem of what to do with unlabeled, disallowed, disavowed, not-even-consciously-perceived experience, experience that cannot be spoken about because it has no currency" (462).

How, then, can women's stories of teaching intervene into the inside workings of our discipline? How can we create narratives, models, that sustain us and work to change the untenable work conditions and institutional attitudes that characterize composition studies? How can a woman make a "double move" of her own, a move that relocates her from her culturally assigned position as object into the position of subject in her own story?

She must speak as the Outsider that she is. She must confront her perhaps not-even consciously perceived experiences by voicing them, by describing the "felt-separateness" that results from disavowing her experience even to herself. In short, she must foreground her alienation by recognizing the culture constructs that separate her and at the same time resisting their inscription.

In theorizing the poetics of women's autobiography, Susan Freidman articulates how women can accomplish that recognition of and resistance to the ways that our culture constructs us:

> cultural representations of woman lead not only to women's alienation, but also to the potential for a "new consciousness" of self. Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness--the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. (39)

Freidman explains that when women write about their lives, they inscribe this double-consciousness of self and group identity and thus create "an identity that is not purely individualistic" nor "purely collective."

> The self constructed in women's autobiographical writing [she says] is often based in, but not limited to, a group consciousness--an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women's individual destiny. . . .Alienation from that historically imposed image of self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech. (40-1)

Think on this: the "alienation. . .is what motivates the writing." The implication is that those alienating emotions--like guilt, anger, jealousy--that I hear my female colleagues voice so often in private settings like the women's room or the lunch table are precisely the narratives that need to be told publically. The double consciousness and the alienation which motivates women to tell their stories together provide women's discursive "double move." This move acknowledges the dominant discourse's category "WOMAN" and undermines its authority by simultaneously gesturing to the transient and contextual self being constructed in the act of writing. The writing process's capacity to formally indicate but not possess non-discursive activities enables this simultaneous gesturing. Thus, in their innovative and comprehensive conceptions of the poetics of women's autobiography, feminist scholars theorize a genre that can acknowledge cultural representation and authorize writers'

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material contexts they show us how to subvert hegemonic definitions of identity and situate ourselves as subjects of our own stories.

But how do these theoretical abstractions pan out when they are applied to my lived experiences, to my actual practices of self-construction and meaning making? That is precisely what you and I have been exploring in our discussion of conferencing and our laments about the lack of role models for us as women composition teachers. We continue to grapple with this question: when we make our female bodies and our self-constructions mean in those ways that are requisite to locating ourselves in the inscriptions of "COMPOSITION TEACHER" and "WOMAN," what does that enterprise look like? Lil Brannon tells us how she envisions the project:

> specifically, I would like us to make visible how the academic world discourages talk about our families and home responsibilities and thereby discourages women, who have historically been assigned there, from participating in full academic life (463).

To her vision I add this: let us make visible our reactions to the exploitative conditions we work in; the guilt we often have when we're not able to meet all the demands placed on us and when we complain about all those demands; the fears we have about students' real or threatened harassment; the anger we feel as a response to the pressure to keep silent about our emotional reactions to these issues and others; the shame and/or anger that might result from our lower-class status as underpaid and/or undereducated subordinates to our male and/or literary col-

leagues.

By way of example, let us listen to the story which follows, the author of which is an adjunct composition instructor in the same program that recently hired me. What she illustrates is one woman's way to become visible in her composition classroom.

Glen:

Relativity and Other Fictions

It was the first test in Mrs. Elmborg's physics class. I was a junior at Topeka West High School, and I looked around at my classmates--sophomores to seniors--writing. They were putting formulae on their papers; I could tell because their hand motions were tight and controlled. I shut my eyes and imagined how good it would feel to be writing v times v1 minus c equals something or other, and then I opened my eyes and went back to my drawing. I had been working on a man in a rowboat floating down the river; before the test, Mrs. Elmborg said it sometimes helped to come up with the right formula if you drew a picture of what physically was happening. She was a nice woman, Mrs. Elmborg--about 60-years-old with white hair and a profile like George Washington. She had a tremendous bosom like a shelf on which she would cross and rest her arms. When she grew impatient, she drummed her fingers against their fullness. Her looks personified what I though teachers should be--the father of our country and the mother of all mothers; she was both authoritarian and kind. I drew some deer along the bank who watched the man float by on the

leaded current of a volume of water, at some peaceful velocity. I added another man to the boat; now the two figures became my hero Henry David Thoreau with his sick tuberculin brother floating for that halcyon week down the Concord and Merrimack rivers, not struggling against the current but not rowing with it, either. They were not eager but they were accepting as the velocity carried them toward the young brother's impending death . . .

That semester I became a better drawer than I ever was or have been since. I never passed an exam. Nevertheless, I enjoyed that class, particularly the lab days when Arthur, my partner, and I would make things happen. We would work hard at setting up the experiments which always reminded me of setting the table nicely--it was precise, it was purposeful, it was right before lunch. Once the experiments were set up, there was the expectation of predicted results, which Arthur loved (though I have not seen Arthur since graduation, I am sure he works happily at predicted results in a physics lab somewhere on this earth) and which I loved to watch Arthur love. You see, when Arthur got excited, his eyeballs would vibrate. He had these pellucid blue eyes surrounded by bald lids, giving him the vulnerable, exposed look of a reptile. He seemed to not blink anymore than a snake, and so even though his eyes were bland, I was hypnotized by them because they were so still. It was on our third experiment that I first noticed his eyeballs begin to palsy, as if they were attached to springs that the god of physics had just boinged with his index finger. After that, I never witnessed too many results

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of our experiments; I was too busy watching Arthur's eyes dance in his head. Those lab experiments brought me up to the cusp between a C and D because Arthur always gave me the results.

What finally got me through the class, though, was the term paper we had to write. I wrote about the metaphors of physics. In my youthful arrogance and insensitivity, I told Mrs. Elmborg how utterly useless physics was except as analogy, but how wonderful it was for that. Take, for example, the Doppler Effect, which states that sounds coming at you are louder than sounds going away. It was the metaphor, I argued, for growing up, for life coming at you,and I said life would be noisy till middle age, when as much of it is behind you as in front of you, so that it makes kind of a steady hum, like a mantra. And in old age . . . in old age, the world will be mute, with only an occasional, indistinguishable hoot of something coming at you, from behind.

Then there was the mobius strip. That was the long strip of paper that's twisted and glued together at the end. If you put your finger on the surface of the mobius strip and follow it, you steadily, inevitably change planes, going from top to bottom, from interior to exterior, of the loop. It is confusion, it is topsy-turvy, it is the road of life, I argued. And then there was Newton and his laws of gravity. They were like the Ten Commandments! Take his beautiful first law--the law of inertia. It observes that the force exerted by one particle on another results in the latter changing the direction of its motion, the magnitude of its speed, or both. This was also the law of love

and marriage, which I had observed from watching my parents cleave unto each other. Generally, his laws of gravity became the laws of life and death, which could be put to tune, I suggested, as the band Blood, Sweat and Tears had done--"What goes up must come down. . ."

Yes, physics was a hard science but an easy metaphor, and Mrs. Elmborg, in her wise and kind teaching, complimented me on my whimsy and passed me with a C. She suggested that I not continue in her second semester.

Had I continued with the second semester, I would have learned another law. As it was, I would confront it not the spring of my sixteenth year, but the spring of my thirty-sixth. It is called the second law of thermodynamics. Briefly stated, it is this: The entropy of the universe tends towards a maximum. Briefly stated in layman's terms, it is this: Shit happens. And it happens because external forces come into play, interrupting the first law of thermodynamics, which states that the energy of the universe is constant.

That year, my 36th, the energy in my world seemed constant. I was married with children, in the middle of my past and future, actuarially balanced in the present, humming along, unworried by life coming at me too loudly or growing too faint behind me. Occasionally, my by now unconscious mantra would cease and I would awaken, wondering where I was on the mobius strip, and how it had taken me where it had. I was not married to the man of my parents' dreams (I married a cowboy, not a lawyer; even worse, he

was Catholic); I was not living where I thought I would be (I was in Bozeman, Montana, rather than Rio de Janeiro); I was not doing what I thought I would with my life (teaching writing at Montana State University rather than writing), yet these were minor detours, and if I studied my motions over the past two decades, they were easily predicted. Arthur of the dangling, jangling eyeballs would have been pleased by where, as a moving body, I had come to rest.

I used physics in my writing classes as metaphors. I would, for example, drop a book on the floor, as much to wake my students up as to enforce a point of writing. After it banged, I would ask, "What made that book hit the floor?"

"You dropped it," they would answer, bored.

"But why didn't it float in the air?"

"Gravity."

"And what's gravity?"

They couldn't describe it, and I would launch into my "don't use words as barriers to experience, curiosity and observation" lecture; "language is supposed to help you direct your curiosity and articulate your experience and observation," I would tell them.

As a writing exercise, I would have them make mobius strips and describe what they observed happening on a twisted piece of paper--what happened when they drove their fingers along one. I told them it was a metaphor for our class; that we were all on topsy turvy rides on one and the same strip and that--while I was

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driving the same as they--I had been over the route a few more times; I told them we were travelling it in parallel lines, that we lived parallel lives, and that the energy of the universe had aligned us to be on the same spot of the strip in this particular composition class; that was our commonality, as well as a part of the theory of relativity.

That spring I told them this with an unsettled feeling in my stomach. A young woman with the same unsettled feeling in hers responded to my pep talk, believing us to be kindred travellers. She first came to me in words on a journal page, trying to use them to find her way, as I had encouraged.

She wrote that she was Kate, 19 and pregnant. Her boyfriend was furious with her; she had tricked and trapped him, and he would have none of it--the tricking, the trapping, the baby. He told her to get an abortion. She didn't want to; she loved him; she loved the baby; she hated herself; she could resolve the conflict if she obliterated herself.

Her entries couldn't have been a more obvious cry that she wanted my help. Her life had stalled and sputtered, and the journal became the hitchhiker's thumb, signalling a need for recognition and compassion. I pretended I didn't see her. Somehow I just couldn't look.

I, too, was pregnant, and I didn't want to be. Furthermore, I wasn't supposed to be. My guess was that Kate had gotten pregnant from youthful exuberance. But I? I'd been around the mobius strip a few times; I had a decade of marriage and predict-

able birth control. What had gotten me was the second law of thermodynamics. You know. Shit happens. I was enraged at the randomness of events; I was enraged that this 19-year-old and I should have this commonality, this parallel event; I was enraged that she wanted my help; I was enraged that I was so enraged.

I suspect my fury came from my sudden inability to connoitre the curves on my great metaphor of life. As I tried desperately to drive this unexpected stretch, I could feel myself skidding to the edge of the mobius strip, trying to navigate hairpins. Briefly, the series of turns consisted of these elements: I loved my husband; I loved my world; I hated this fetus; I could resolve the conflict if I obliterated the baby. My husband, the Catholic, was appalled at my anarchy; he would have none of it; he couldn't live with a murderer, he said.

I was speechless--I was wordless--with confusion. I could not follow my own advice of using language to help shape and control my experience. There is a third law of thermodynamics that states that the energy of the world can cool to a point so that all motion is de-activated; I was at that frozen, forceless, will-less point. I was comatose at the wheel.

Meanwhile, desperate and finding some relief in words, Kate kept writing journal entries to me. The sound of her life--and of mine--screamed at me with each page. There were entries about her parents raising her child; they were typical Montana parents; they had a 19-year-old daughter and were only 37, she said . . . Young enough to have a late child . . . no one would know it was

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hers. I was a year younger than her parents, my own life screamed; certainly I could raise my own child.

She had some friends, she wrote in one entry, friends who were married and a little older than she. Maybe she could give the child to them? I had friends who were married and had not been able to have children. I thought maybe I could give my child to them.

Kate could put it up for adoption, she wrote. Kate could keep it and raise it alone, she wrote someplace else. I could put it up for adoption; I could keep it and raise it alone because by now my marriage was effectively annulled by the mere fact that I considered abortion. I had tricked my husband all these years. I was not what he had predicted. I was not.

Failing to get a response from me, Kate finally came to my office. She was running out of time to make her decision. So was I. She cried; what was she to do? She truly believed I knew; she expected me to know. Even though I looked nothing like Mrs. Elmborg--no fatherly George Washington profile, no motherly bust on which to rest a confused and tired head, I would help her; I was, after all, her mother's age, and so I should give the advice that her mother would, if only she could talk to her mother like she could to me. And I could offer better advice, she told me, because I was a teacher, a word teacher . . . her mom was just a ranchwife.

I looked at her. I wanted to scream at her pretty face, too pinched for her sweet number of years, that I didn't want to be a

mother to my own flesh and blood, let alone to her, and why didn't she leave me alone, take her damned needs and get out of my office? I didn't. It was too cruel, too unmotherly.

I looked at her some more. I wanted to tell her that she and I were in the same car, in a place on the mobius strip I had never been before, and that I wasn't sure I could drive or navigate, and it was perhaps she who needed to take over. I didn't; my pride was too great.

"I don't know." That's what I told her. "I just don't know. I just don't know."

Kate dropped out of school soon after I failed to talk to her, and I never found out how she resolved her conflict. I won't tell you how I resolved mine because this isn't a story about that kind of choice; it's about choosing to not respond to a call for help because it would mean personal disclosure; it's about choosing to remain silent because it would show a loss of authority; it's about choosing to deny a commonality that I had insisted existed abstractly but refused to accept in Kate's and my identical biology; it's about choosing to disbelieve the ordering power I had professed words offered and so deny their empowering possibilities to a younger person; it's about choosing to not do what Mrs. Elmborg did for me when I was young, which was to respond to me as a person of worth, even if I couldn't do physics. Only what I did was much worse. My sin of omission had the potential to affect a life; not a physics grade. It's about choosing wrong.

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Finally, it's about a law in physics called a singularity. A singularity is a situation that general relativity predicted, an indication in Einstein's equations of an infinitely dense point with no dimensions. At that singular point, all laws break down. They all become fictitious.

I've read what the formula is, but it's long and complicated. Sometimes I try Mrs. Elmborg's advice from long ago: I draw a picture to try to figure it out. Usually I end up with a square for a room. There's a desk in the square, and a woman sitting at the desk. The woman is me. In front of her sits a smaller woman, looking at her, waiting.

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